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Contents

Briefs and Comments

25X1

France: *Cantonal Elections* 2

25X6

Finland: *Parliamentary Elections* 3

USSR-Jamaica: *Manley's Visit* 4

Yemens: *Withdrawal Agreement* 4

25X1

Nigeria: *Student Unrest* 5

25X1

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FRANCE: Cantonal Elections

Voters in half of France's more than 3,500 cantons will vote tomorrow for representatives to departmental general councils. News of the two-round election, which concludes 25 March, has taken a back seat to the special session of Parliament convoked last Wednesday to discuss unemployment and the European Parliament election in June. The contest will provide the first large-scale sampling of electoral sentiment since the parliamentary elections last March, but local peculiarities and issues will make interpreting the results difficult. [Redacted]

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Many observers tend to discount the cantonal elections because the general councils are only local bodies. For many politicians, however, the councils are a step toward higher office, and these bodies do elect the national Senate. [Redacted]

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As in byelections last fall in which the left won all five seats at stake, the cantonal elections are likely to result in a leftist victory that some observers will interpret as a repudiation of government policies. The left, however, has won a majority of the popular vote in every cantonal election since 1958. [Redacted]

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The special session of Parliament has highlighted--at an inopportune juncture for the government of Prime Minister Barre--considerable public concern about the heavy layoffs the government seeks in order to help streamline several ailing industries. As expected, the government has taken considerable fire during debate from both its Gaullist allies-cum-rivals and the left opposition, but the relatively disorganized nature of the proceedings so far has tended to mute their impact. The government is nonetheless concerned that unrest over its policies could push formerly progovernment areas with large numbers of industrial workers into the opposition camp in Sunday's election. [Redacted]

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FINLAND: Parliamentary Elections

Finland's voters are expected to demonstrate their growing conservative attitude in the elections tomorrow and Monday. The Conservative Party, which has been excluded from government for more than a decade because of Soviet opposition, could win as many as 10 seats, which would make it the largest nonsocialist party and thus difficult to ignore. For several years the Conservatives have tried to win Soviet acceptance through foreign policy statements, but recent Soviet press commentaries indicate that they have made no headway. Such Soviet interference may be one of the factors prompting the Finnish electorate to take a more conservative turn. The combined Soviet pressure and conservative tilt could make the formation of a new government difficult.

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YEMENS: Withdrawal Agreement

North and South Yemeni military commanders who met yesterday in Sana agreed to troop withdrawals in the areas of recent fighting, according to press reports. The withdrawals, which are scheduled to be completed by late next week, are supposed to begin today and will be supervised by the Arab League military committee. The Aden-backed National Democratic Front nevertheless continues to call for the overthrow of the North Yemeni Government. On Thursday, the Front radio appealed for its fighters to step up the struggle. [Redacted]

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NIGERIA: Student Unrest

Several weeks of student unrest over an education issue with regional overtones may stir wider tensions as politicking intensifies with the approach of civilian rule in October. School authorities have closed all northern universities and several colleges. They were faced with spreading student boycotts and some violent demonstrations against countrywide university admission policies that allegedly favor the more advanced south over the Muslim north. The situation has spawned unconfirmed rumors that some northern politicians are stirring up student unrest for their own ends and that student protests have sparked clashes between Christian and Muslim communities in the north.

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